

THE PROMISE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

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By means of this lecture, we celebrate the contribution of Professor Paul Stirling to social anthropology. He was the founder of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology here at the University of Kent in 1965 and thus indirectly responsible for all of us being here. But he is perhaps more widely known for his study of Turkish village life and the great changes that have affected it. He began this work in 1947 and continues to this day, almost fifty years later.

Less well known is that he is, in effect - though perhaps reluctantly - one of us, that's to say a *visual* anthropologist. His photographs are already available on the Internet. Moreover, he is currently putting them together with segments of the Open University film series on which he worked in the early 1980s in a hypermedia compendium. This will also include his fieldwork notes and his many written publications.

Comprehensive ethnographic accounts of this kind, particularly those evolved over many years and which make use of a variety of media, represent, in my view, one of the most valuable achievements of the anthropological project as a whole. In this lecture, I shall be arguing that film-making holds great promise as a means of ethnographic description but that this promise has not yet been fully realised for a combination of reasons. These are partly technical, but above all, they are intellectual

reasons associated with the historical development of anthropology as an academic discipline.

In contrast to many past advocates of the use of ethnographic film, I shall not be hitching this argument to any faith in the value of film as an objective recording medium. In common with any other practising film-maker, I am only too aware of the subjectivity and artifice involved in the practice of making any film. But just as ethnographic text-makers have become aware that the subjectivity of their accounts is something that *should be built upon rather than denied*, so too have ethnographic film-makers. In fact, if anything, I would argue ethnographic film-makers have been ahead of their text-based colleagues in recognizing this. But whoever it was who got there first, a rapprochement is now possible that was not possible before.

At this festival, we also celebrate the centenary of the the first Lumière film, dating from 1895 and considered by many to represent the birth of cinema; shortly we shall be celebrating the centenary of the 1898 Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Straits, a small group of islands lying midway between northern Australia and New Guinea. This expedition is conventionally held to demarcate the modern era of British social anthropology, based on fieldwork, from the armchair anthropology of the generation of Sir James Frazer.

These two centenaries are linked by more than mere coincidence. For it is an intriguing historical fact that Alfred Haddon, the leader of the Cambridge expedition, took one of the new cine cameras with him and used it to film some four minutes of material on Murray Island, the largest in the Torres Straits archipelago. This appears to be the first time that moving images were actually recorded in the field (see Long and Laughren 1993).

This material consists entirely of a series of dances and technical processes. Perhaps the most interesting is the very first sequence, which consists of a series of

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shots of a masked dance which formed part of a secret men's cult connected with head-hunting. In actual fact, this cult, known as the Malu-bomai, and all the dances associated with it had been abandoned some twenty-five years before when the islanders converted to Christianity. The cult masks, originally made from turtle shell and featuring what Haddon refers to as a "beard" fashioned from human jaw bones had been destroyed. So for the purposes of the film, Haddon supplied the islanders with cardboard and they recreated the masks (Haddon 1901). Two of these cardboard masks were later solemnly carried back to the anthropology museum at Cambridge where they feature as items numbers 367 and 368 in the expedition catalogue.

So it turns out that even this very first ethnographic film was a reconstruction and its status as ethnographic evidence is thereby compromised. This did not however restrain Haddon's enthusiasm for the new technology. Two years later, we find him writing to Baldwin Spencer, then preparing a fieldtrip to Central Australia; "You really *must* take a kinematograph .. It is an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus". Spencer took his advice as did Rudolf Pösch, the Austrian ethnographic film pioneer, who shot films both in Papua and in southern Africa shortly thereafter.

But despite this early enthusiasm, the use of film in anthropological research cannot be said to have really taken off. There have been some notable exceptions, one of the best known being the case of Gregory Bateson. A former student of Haddon's at Cambridge, and like him a zoologist by first training, Bateson was to shoot some 10 hours of material in his well-known expedition with Margaret Mead to Bali and New Guinea in 1936-38. But by and large, and not just in Britain and the States, but also in all European countries where anthropology is a well-established academic discipline, film-making has remained a marginal activity. It may be promoted energetically by a few specialists, followed eagerly by legions of students, but it is

still received by the majority of professional anthropologists with what may be described as - at best - politeness rather than enthusiasm.

For despite the current interest in ethnographic film amongst students, publishers and festival goers, there continues to be a feeling that visual anthropology in general and image generation in particular, be it in film or photography, is not a genuinely serious academic activity. Haddon's view that the camera is *indispensable* to anthropological research may be contrasted with the lament of Paul Hockings, the editor, in the recently published second edition of the influential landmark volume, *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, that the majority of anthropologists still feel, a century after Haddon, that they can achieve their professional goals without the use of photography of any kind (Hockings 1995:507).

But despite this present sorry state of affairs, I want to propose that the circumstances are now finally at hand for integrating ethnographic film-making into the mainstream of both research and teaching in anthropology and thereby finally fulfilling Haddon's hopes for it.

In part, these more promising circumstances have been brought about technical developments. Video cameras are much easier and cheaper to use than film cameras and the new digital technology has brought broadcast standard technical quality within the budgetary reach of University departments. The new cameras weigh very little, can be used in very low light conditions and are easy to operate. When used in conjunction with radio microphones, they allow a single person working on his/her own to produce high quality rushes. Once gathered, visual images are now much easier and cheaper to manipulate, be it in non-linear edit suites, in the context of CD-ROM devices or simply for the purposes of projection, which has also improved greatly in technical quality in recent years. The development of hypermedia promises to allow the use of visual images, moving as

well as still, in conjunction with texts and graphics. Meanwhile the vertiginous expansion of the Internet promises the possibility of downloading exogenous material and, copyright considerations permitting, juxtaposing it with one's own in a broad variety of different ways.

There remain some difficult practical problems to be resolved. The acquisition of film-making skills remains both essential and time consuming. The actual technical knowledge now required to make films may be a great deal less than it used to be. But a considerable degree of technical expertise is still required nevertheless, whilst directorial and editorial skills remain as important as they ever were. The demand for opportunities to acquire these skills is presently much greater than the supply as we know only too well at the Granada Centre.

Another major problem is that there is currently no satisfactory archival medium for video. According to the technical experts, deterioration can begin to set in after a single year, and will certainly affect all tapes within ten years. It seems very unlikely that any tape recorded today will be playable fifty years from now, if only because the playback technology will have changed so much. So all the videotape-based libraries being assiduously built up in anthropology departments around the country have a very short life-span ahead of them. All this can be contrasted unfavourably with the fact that 16mm films printed in the 1920s can still be projected without great difficulty today. It may be possible to overcome these archival problems by transferring material on to other media, including - ironically enough - to film, but this remains a very expensive procedure. But here too digital technology may prove more satisfactory than the analogue video systems we have been using to date.

This last issue apart, most of the technical problems associated with making ethnographic films have to a large degree been overcome by anonymous electronics

engineers beaver away in the heart Japanese and American media corporations. They have not had us in mind of course, but we can benefit from their ingenuity anyway. Yet whilst the overcoming of these technical problems are perhaps a necessary precondition, they are not in themselves sufficient to ensure the acceptance of ethnographic film-making as a serious academic activity.

And here we arrive at the crucial point: in order for ethnographic film to become of central importance to anthropology, its theoretical status has to be articulated in terms that relate to the current theoretical and methodological concerns of anthropology more generally. All the breathless talk about digital video, the Internet or the great potential offered by storage capacities expressed in terms of megabytes, terabytes and even petabytes should not blind us to this central fact. This is the matter with which I will be concerned for the remainder of this lecture.

For when Haddon enthused about the camera, he was enthusing about it as a means of data gathering or, relatedly, as a means of salvage ethnography. Whilst both these impulses may still have a place in the general project of anthropology, neither represents a theoretical position as such and certainly neither is exactly on the cutting edge. Moreover, as Emilie de Brigard has pointed out, "interest in the material expressions of culture, which occupied Haddon's generation, began to be supplanted, early in this century, by emphasis on psychologistic traits and the intangibles of social structure. For many years", she adds "it was beyond the technical capabilities of cinematography to follow this shift" (de Brigard 1995:17).

Even when film was used in the ensuing years to investigate aspects of psychology and social structure, as in the Bateson-Mead venture, it was still used primarily as a means of data gathering. When Bateson and Mead shot their ten hours of material in Bali and New Guinea, they were not intending to make a documentary as such. Rather they were making a record which could be examined subsequently,

under more rigorous conditions than was possible in the fleeting moment in the field. Only once the principal results of the analysis had been presented in book form, was a film made out of the rushes, apparently as an afterthought, some 15 years after they had been shot. It is undoubtedly this that accounts for what has been described as the QED character of the resultant films.

Even as late as 1973, Mead was still clinging to the idea of the camera as a data-gathering device when, in her introduction to *Principles of Visual Anthropology* she envisaged a magnificent future when a self-loading 360 degree camera, placed in a strategic spot within a village could collect ethnographic materials all day long without any human intervention. In a final flourish she observed that as "finer instruments have taught us more about the cosmos, so finer recording of these precious materials can illuminate our growing knowledge and appreciation of mankind" (Mead 1995:9-10)

This idea of the camera as an impassive and distant recording device analogous to the telescope was already very dated by the 1970s. By this time, the cluster of film-making approaches known variously as *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema, observational cinema, participatory cinema and so on, which had been made possible by the development in the 1950s of portable synch sound systems, light cameras and fast stocks, was already well-established. The practitioners of these various approaches, as well as those who have commented upon them, have sometimes sought to stress the differences between them (see, for example, Winston 1995). But what they had in common was a commitment to making films that followed the activities of the protagonists rather than directing them according to some predetermined script, as practitioners of earlier approaches to documentary had been constrained to do largely by technical reasons. For economy of exposition, even if at the risk of some controversy, I will refer to these approaches generically as

"observational". But if observation, albeit in variable forms, was an intrinsic aspect of all these approaches, it was a process of observation that arose from an active engagement in the protagonists' lives rather than being the carried out from some remote watchtower as envisaged by Mead.

A further consequence of these technical developments was that film-makers were now able to deal with subjects in the terrains classically occupied only by anthropologists and to give voice to protagonists from Fourth World societies who previously had been only been talked about. Now it was possible to discover what the Turkana really thought about their exchange partners in a marriage alliance, witness the political acumen of New Guinea big men in all the twists and turns of their public rhetorical performances or observe Amazonian gender relations being played out in collective ritual events whilst listening to what the participants had to say about them.

These were films about what de Brigard had called "the intangibles of social structure" and they been made to the highest technical standards. But still they did not cut much ice in academic circles. In essence, this was because there was a fundamental mismatch between the theoretical ambitions of anthropology generally at that time and the kind of knowledge that an ethnographic film could deliver. For all the major post-war theoretical paradigms - be it functionalism, structuralism, Marxism, sociobiology or some hybrid of one or more of these - were based on general principles of abstraction and generalization. In contrast, film, by its nature is resolutely concrete and particular.

Film is most effective in representing the performative aspects of culture defined in the broadest sense - political performances, religious rituals, aesthetic endeavours of the most diverse kinds, the symbolic aspects of everyday life. It is also particularly good at giving some idea of what these experiences mean to those who

participate in them. This it does by showing the emotional or psychological impact that these experiences have or by providing the protagonists with the opportunity to give their own explanations about them. But within all the dominant theoretical paradigms in the post-war period, such performative or emotional aspects of social and cultural life were regarded merely as epiphenomena of underlying principles. Meanwhile the interpretations given by the protagonists themselves were not to be taken at face value but rather treated as part of the data to be explained.

But whenever any attempt is made to provide these explanatory theoretical contexts, usually in voice-over, the result is usually at best a very pedestrian film in which the images are swamped with words. At worst, it can have the effect of belittling the beliefs and behaviours of the protagonists. Even if the commentary does not sound pretentious at the time that it is scripted, it is very likely to do so in the future, for nothing dates as quickly in a documentary as its commentary. And usually all this is to no avail anyway since the soundtrack of a film rarely provides enough time to draw out all the sociological significances of the events portrayed.

It was for this reason that the early attempts to establish an anthropological seal of approval for ethnographic films in terms of the degree to which they provided contextualization or embodied an "implicit or explicit theory of culture" did not prove successful (see Heider 1976, Ruby 1975, Rollwagen 1988). These criteria were developed in response to the generalizing theoretical paradigms of the day and there was no way that ethnographic films could live up to them. No film could ever provide an exhaustive context, be it theoretical, cultural, historical or whatever. As the reviews that anthropologists wrote of ethnographic films invariably proved, there would always be a context too far or too complex to be covered in a film.

However, I would argue that as a result of the changing theoretical climate that has been gradually transforming the discipline since the early 1980s, a role for

film as a mode of ethnographic description worthy of the respect of academic anthropologists has finally emerged. Some have referred to this new climate as "post-modernist" whilst others have preferred to attribute it to the rise of an "interpretive paradigm" at the expense of a paradigm derived from the natural sciences that formerly dominated the discipline (see Marcus and Fisher 1986). But however one might wish to characterize or explain it, I would claim that this new theoretical climate favours a more open attitude about the potential benefits of ethnographic film to social anthropology as a whole.

More specifically, I would suggest that there are five features of this climate that are particularly important in this connection. They are:

(1) the drawing away from "master narratives" and the focus instead on the description of particular ethnographic cases, coupled with greater openness to experimentation in the rendering of such accounts.

(2) the acknowledgement that social life is not the mere expression of underlying structures, but rather is a processual matter, which depends on a day to day basis on social performances of many different kinds to maintain hierarchies, define boundaries, generate meanings. Ethnographic description therefore becomes a process of elucidating these performances rather than demonstrating their function or role in an abstract system.

(3) the recognition that a variety of meanings - political, religious, personal and so forth - assigned from a variety of different positions can be ascribed to social events. This has the methodological corollary that "monolinear authority" in anthropological texts should be replaced by "polyphonous" accounts which remain to some extent open-ended and in which many different voices may be represented.

(4) the stress on the inter-subjectivity of the fieldwork situation, accompanied by the recognition that anthropological knowledge is the product of a relationship,

often equal, between the fieldworker and his/her subjects that raises potentially difficult ethical issues

(5) the awareness that even the most "scientific" of anthropological texts is constrained and structured by rhetorical conventions which permit the audience to understand not merely the content of the text but what kind of text it is, and what kind of authority it claims.

These theoretical developments have had the most dramatic impact on anthropological texts as well as on practices in the field. The agonistic stage is perhaps now over, and as we enter the "po-po-mo" era, "po-mo" effects are becoming part of the uncontested methodological furniture of anthropology. I would argue that in incorporating these insights in this way, anthropology has moved towards the practice of ethnographic film-makers, many of whom have been debating such issues for far longer than ethnographic text-makers. To name but one example, most of these issues are raised quite explicitly in *Chronicle of a Summer*, made by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in 1960, at least two decades before they became fashionable amongst ethnographic text-makers.

This was not due to any preternatural prescience on the part of the film-makers. Rather it was simply a consequence of the nature of their activity. To give but one example: it has to be recognized that film-making is generally a much more intrusive activity than other forms of anthropological field research. As such, it has the capacity to bring to the surface the ambiguities in the power relations between observer and observed much more starkly than is the case, say, with a researcher armed only with a note-pad. The latter can scribble down a few notes and decide what to do with them afterwards. But a film-maker will often have to negotiate much more specifically the terms under which his/her activity can take place. As a result, the nexus of relationships through which a representation is engendered tend to be

more evident in a film than in a written text, particularly in the case of a film shot in an observational style. In order to gain the consent of protagonists, the film-maker will often have to accept that *their* voices, representing their particular views, will have a prominent place in the final film.

These general characteristics of film production tend to undermine attempts at "monolinear" authority in ethnographic film. So too does the fact that a film is usually a more open representation than a written text that despite the best efforts of its maker, can remain recalcitrant to definitive analytical closure. These loose ends can survive the editorial process and provide the basis for a re-interpretation, an enhancement or indeed a profound critique of the meaning the film-maker has sought to give the film. This is particularly noticeable as time goes by and the film's audiences share less and less of the film-maker's cultural assumptions.

Two films that we have screened in this festival, *Mother Dao* and *Bontoc Eulogy* demonstrate this effect very dramatically. Albeit in different ways, each shows how film material shot for colonial purposes and informed by a deep-seated racist ideology can be reworked so as to provide a critique of the world-view that generated them. Some might argue that such examples demonstrate the unreliability of film as a means of ethnographic description. I would suggest, on the contrary, that they indicate rather that film has an intrinsic quality of "thick inscription" that will generally resist total domination by the inevitably time-bound interpretation put upon it. As such it can be a rich and provocative source of re-analysis and re-interpretation that can take place many years, decades, even a century later. Whilst this is obviously true to some degree of written texts as well, it is an effect that is particularly marked in film.

There are also a number of features of the process of post-production which oblige film-makers to be more consciously aware of the rhetorical conventions of

their medium of communication than is generally the case with text-makers. One of the most important of these is related to the fact that whereas the writing of a book usually represents a process of expansion and elaboration of field-notes, the editing of the a film represents a process of synthesis and reduction. The film-maker is therefore obliged to strive for the greatest economy in getting over what he/she wants to communicate. This in turn encourages a very much more careful consideration of the conventions whereby the eventual audience will "read" and understand the film.

But probably even more important to this process is the continual engagement with the consequences of what has been aptly called the "seductive veracity" of the indexical photographic image (Banks 1990). All documentary film-makers are keenly aware of the paradox entailed by the need to manipulate one's rushes at the editing stage so that they no longer provide a literal account of reality whilst at the same time maintaining the illusion of realism. Ethnographic text-makers are also, of course, routinely engaged in such transformations of the literal truths embodied in their field notes, but until the recent explosion of interest in anthropology considered as a form of literature, they simply did not direct a great deal of attention to this process.

But how does all this relate to actual use of ethnographic film within anthropology? There are a broad variety of possibilities. It seems to me to be no reason why one should not still use the film camera as a simple recording device, particularly to record actions, such as those involved in musical performance or dance, that it is difficult for the human eye to track under normal circumstances. At the other extreme from this documentation usage, there is the strategy of making available the technology to the protagonists of ethnographic study and seeing what they do with it. Lying somewhere in between there is a developing and interesting

genre of "advocacy" films involving collaboration between film-makers and indigenous groups. All these are perfectly legitimate objectives for anthropologists interested in making films. As is too the making of films with didactic objectives, particularly those dealing with subjects such as technology, ethnomusicology and others in which visual illustration may be extremely useful.

But whilst all of these modes of use are important and worthy of our interest, I will not be concerned with them here. Instead I shall be concerned with the use of an ethnographic film in the rendering of an account of the experience of fieldwork since it is the rendering of such accounts that, by general consent, still lies at the heart of the academic discipline of anthropology.

It is impossible to go any further without broaching the vexed issue of how one actually defines ethnographic film. This has been the subject of extended debate in the literature of visual anthropology. I am sure you will be relieved to know that I do not intend to go into it here at any length. Suffice it to say that whereas many contributors to the debate have sought to establish criteria for assessing the "ethnographicness" of a film on the basis of content (implicitly if not explicitly often that of the culturally exotic) or on more formal features of the film as a finished text (for example, the degree of contextualization or of reflexivity) (Heider 1976, Ruby 1980), I would lay greater store on the circumstances under which the film was made. I would expect these circumstances to be revealed in some way in the filmic text, but would refrain from tying it too specifically to any particular diagnostic features of the latter since these are likely to be subject to the vagaries of fashion in anthropological thinking.

Put simply, my view is that a necessary feature of any film one might describe as "ethnographic" would be the fact that it had been made under circumstances conforming to the norms associated with the characteristically anthropological

fieldwork method of participant observation. For all the comings and goings of theoretical paradigms in the course of the century, the general features of the anthropological fieldwork method have remained remarkably consistent, at least since the days of Malinowski. It is still this method that provides what one might call the least indeterminate means of distinguishing anthropology from closely cognate disciplines such as sociology or social psychology. The precise diagnostic features of what is considered good ethnographic practice may have been constantly changing in line with theoretical fashion, but I think it can be argued that the actual method of participant observation itself has not, at least not to the same degree. It thus provides a relatively constant yardstick by which to judge the ethnographicness of films.

Marcus Banks (1992) has already pointed out the many "startling" similarities between the canons of practice of the various documentary approaches referred to above and "the features which distinguish anthropological research and writing from any other form of human observation". If truth be told, he himself appears to be somewhat dismissive of the significance of these similarities, describing them as no more than a case of "mimesis". However whatever the origins or reasons for the development of these documentary approaches, I do not see why one should not espouse them if they conform closely with our own practice. Nor is there any reason why we should not subsequently customize them to suit our own purposes.

Although I would characterise them in slightly different ways, the parallels that I perceive between observational documentary practice and the participant-observation fieldwork method are very similar to those identified by Marcus Banks. The most important of these, in my view, is the common assumption that the product generated (notes in one case, rushes in the other) along with the insights that they embody, arise out of an extended engagement with the lives of the protagonists. Both anthropologists and observational film-makers vary in the relative importance they

give to participation on the one hand and observation on the other. But whatever the exact mix, there is a common belief that understanding should be achieved through a gradual process of discovery, that is, through following the lives of the subjects rather than by placing them within predetermined matrices, be it a script in the case of the film-makers or a questionnaire in the case of anthropologists.

There are further parallels. Both anthropologists and observational film-makers usually work with a limited number of people. Yet in presenting this work to an audience, with varying degrees of explicitness, both assume some principle of metonymy, whereby the people whom the author has known are regarded as representative of some broader social category. In representing these people, it is not only the most visible and public aspects of their lives that are taken into account: both anthropologists and observational film-makers will often find the minutiae of daily life, the gossip and the apparent trivia, as revealing.

Anthropologists will often also be equally interested in the non-verbal aspects of social life. Many will therefore find themselves in fundamental sympathy with the following characteristically insightful comment by the distinguished observational film-maker David MacDougall:

"Observational film-making was founded on the assumption that things happen in the world which are worth watching, and that their own distinctive spatial and temporal configurations are part of what is worth watching about them. Observational films are frequently analytical, but they also make a point of being open to categories of meaning that might transcend the film-maker's analysis. This stance of humility before the world can of course be self-deceiving and self-serving, but it also implicitly acknowledges the subject's story is often more important than the film-maker's" (MacDougall 1994:31)

It is this openness to the protagonists' "categories of meaning" and to the "distinctive spatial and temporal configurations" of their world that makes the

observational approach to film-making appropriate to social anthropology, particularly when one is dealing with non-verbal subject-matters that are difficult to present in a written text.

I am not suggesting that making ethnographic films in the observational manner is merely the same as the canonical form of participant observation. Nor, I hasten to add, am I suggesting that the fact that it might arise from extended cohabitation with the protagonists represent a faultless guarantee of the ethnographicness of a film. The incorporation of the particular vision of social life that is encouraged by an anthropological training remains an essential feature also and here I would lay particular stress on the respect shown for "the native point of view" and the interest in the inter-relationship between different domains of social life, particularly the relationship between the domestic and the public domains. In emphasizing fieldwork method here at the expense of more conventional criteria to do with content or formal attributes of the final filmic text, my concern is not to contest the possible relevance of the latter so much as to focus attention on the ways in which the actual process of making films can assist in the development of qualitative ethnographic research strategies.

On the basis of my own experience, I would suggest that one of the principal advantages of making a film is that it has what one might term a catalytic effect on the participant-observer process. Even in the video era, there is a limit on how much you can actually film. This serves to concentrate the mind - whilst still in the field - as to what is really important to you about the community in which you are living. With written texts, this process often takes place long after one has left the field when it is generally too late to follow up any new ideas that this might generate.

Nor is it only one's own mind that the presence of the camera concentrates. It can also concentrate the minds of the protagonists as to what it is about their lives

that they specifically want to present to you. That such a presentation could be of value to anthropological research would have been anathema both to anthropologists committed to the notion of a natural science of society. It would have deemed equally unacceptable by film-makers in the Mead-Bateson mould who used right-angle lenses and a variety of other dissimulating strategies to ensure that their subjects' behaviour would not be affected by the presence of the camera. But in the present theoretical climate, in which it is now more broadly recognized that most anthropological understanding arises from such interactions, the value of the camera as a generator of knowledge can be more readily accepted.

There are occasions and circumstances when the presence of a camera can be inhibiting, or possibly compromising politically or ethically for the protagonists or even for the film-maker. Clearly under these circumstances, the camera has no place. But the camera can also serve to give an anthropologist a *raison d'être* that is more understandable to his/her hosts. An anthropologist making a film is obviously working: a person hanging around with a notebook and making occasional marks in it is perhaps more suspect. Furthermore the film-making anthropologist is able to share the results of his/her activity with his/her hosts and thereby give them another chance to understand if not actually to sympathize with what he/she is doing.

This is not a new technique. Flaherty used it with his Inuit hosts when shooting *Nanook of the North* over seventy years ago. But one of my doctoral students, Carlos Flores has been using a development of this technique in a Q'echi Mayan village. As a Ladino Guatemalan working in a community that has suffered terrible repression from counter-insurgency military activity, Carlos felt that it was very important that his work be as transparent as possible. He has therefore been working with a local community video team, financed by the local Catholic Church, making

films about local customs. The community film-makers have learnt about him whilst Carlos learnt about them in the course of collaborating on these joint projects. At the same time, the collaboration allowed for an exchange of technical knowledge.

Nor is the screening of rushes merely potentially good for relations with one's hosts. It is now also widely recognized that the screening of rushes can generate all manner of new insights as the protagonists comment on them, often bringing to light facts or connections that previously they had not thought worthy of comment. Many of you will know Howard Morphy's stimulating 1993 Malinowski Memorial lecture. Here he discusses his experience of this process when working as anthropological adviser on Ian Dunlop's film *Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka'wuy*. Not only did he learn more about Yolgnu funerary ritual but it also lead him on to some very interesting more general reflections about the anthropological interpretation of ritual. In *Madarrpa Funeral*, the commentary voice is actually that of Ian Dunlop, the director. But some of you will also be aware of the way in which David MacDougall has taken this technique one step further in a number of his Australian films and has systematically incorporated Aboriginal protagonists' comments recorded in the edit suite into the commentary track of the film.

Even without the presence of a protagonist, the editing of a film can also be part of the process of enlightenment. In a manner analogous to the sifting through of field notes, the logging and organization of rushes can yield new insights simply through intensive engagement with the material. Later, the requirement to produce a film with a coherent narrative can lead one to juxtapose shots or sequences that generate new meanings for each. Even features of the final "dressing" of the film, such as the exact formulation of commentary points or the translation of subtitles can all draw one's attention to certain important issues that have previously been neglected.

One of the unfortunate consequences of trying to establish the criteria for

assessing the ethnographicness of ethnographic film on the basis of features of the finished film text is that it has obscured the role that the production process itself can play in the actual generation of anthropological knowledge. The knowledge thereby generated need not necessarily be integrated into the film itself. It could be incorporated instead into an accompanying text. Moreover, this is but one of the several ways in which films and written texts can be used in a complementary fashion. In the past, logistical problems have often hampered attempts to use films and texts in conjunction with one another within anthropology, but the arrival of CD-Rom technology offers a practical vehicle for overcoming these problems as well as exploring a range of possible relationships between moving images and texts in ethnographic representation.

After decades of seeking theoretical absolutism, it seems that we have finally come to accept that it is in the nature of our discipline for all conclusions to be provisional. Our aim is no longer to identify objective social laws or cultural universals, nor even to elaborate transcendent principles of analysis. Rather our more modest ambition is simply to render an adequate account of our personal experiences of social and cultural difference, given present theoretical understandings and the resources available to us. I believe that ethnographic film has an important role to play in this project.

In common with most other academic proponents of ethnographic film, I would energetically support the view that films should never and will never displace or replace texts in the anthropological enterprise. If we think of ethnographic films as a direct alternative to ethnographic texts and seek to judge them by the same criteria, then it is all too easy to dismiss them as being inadequate. But if we consider them as a means of representation that may be used in conjunction with written texts to provide more rounded and comprehensive ethnographic accounts, then the present

combination of technical and intellectual circumstances provide every encouragement for thinking that the promise of ethnographic film, held in suspension since the first days of modern anthropology, is finally to be redeemed.

Paul Stirling began to work in this direction some fifty years ago - midway between us today and Haddon - when he began photographing the people of Sakaltutan. Today, these photographs have a different meaning to that which they had at the time when they were taken and we cannot imagine the construction that anthropologists of the future will put on these, or indeed on any other images our generation has produced. What we can be certain of is that they will be different from ours, just as ours are different from those of film-makers and anthropologists who generated texts, filmic and written, in the early years of this century. But because of their immediacy, the thickness of their inscription, ethnographic films are particularly likely to provoke constant re-assessments. Far from being a measure of their unreliability, this is, in my view, one of their particular merits.

For a final consideration of this effect, let us return once again to that very first film of Haddon's. In that first ethnographic film sequence on the Malu-Bomai cult, three out of the four men are wearing grass skirts. In his text, Haddon describes them as "kilts" but does not make any further comment. Now I am no Melanesianist but on seeing this apparent transvesticism in the context of a secret male initiation cult connected with head-hunting, I am forcibly reminded of *Naven*, the classic account of Iatmul ceremonial by Gregory Bateson - dedicated, incidentally, to his former tutor, one A.C.Haddon - in which he traces the various complex relationships between gender role reversal, transvesticism, male initiation ceremonies, head-hunting and male reproductive power (Bateson 1980).

This association of head-hunting with male reproductive power, control over the reproduction of society as a whole and secret rituals from which women are

excluded has resonances in the study of similar phenomena in other parts of the world, notably in Amazonia which is the ethnographic region with which I am most familiar. These comparative examples suggest a line of enquiry into the Torres Straits dances that seems never to have occurred to Haddon. At the very least, they would appear to explain why it was that although they had abandoned head-hunting and converted to Christianity a generation before, and despite the fact that their masks were only made of cardboard, the Murray Islanders were very concerned that the women should not see them. A century later then, and with the stimulus provided by the thick inscription of the filmic record, we may be in a position to understand something about these dances that was not apparent to the person who recorded them.

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